

The
Inglebrook

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER XXV.

INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH.

Oban pier was almost deserted: only a group of sailors and fishermen remained, gathered under the shelter of the pier-master's office.

One of these men was engaged in an animated dispute with Ronald Campbell.

'No, no,' he was saying; 'we wouldn't go for a fine English gentleman; he offered us twenty pounds; so it's not likely we'll risk our lives for you.'

'And there iss no English shentleman a better man than the laird o' Fas-Ghlac,' Ronald replied contemptuously.

'The one that was here an hour ago could spend more money, anyhow,' answered the sailor with a sneer. 'No, no; there's no boat will leave Oban pier for Mull to-day.'

Ronald turned on his heel in disgust.

'These folk,' he growled to himself, 'are aye frightened o' a wet skin. If a crew o' Fas Ghlac men could not tak' yon smack across the Firth o' Lorne I would be tanned. But those fellows do not mind. To-morrow will do for them, or the next day; and it iss no matter to them if we hef to stay in this tiffle of a place for a week; oh no, no matter whateffer. But Oban iss not a good place to stay in, and I will be tryin' some other plan.'

The truth is, Ronald was in no amiable mood. He had been cruelly disappointed about this visit to Oban. He had looked forward to it with great joy. He was to have bought the wedding ring for Sybil, and some additional furniture for his cottage, as well as the stuff for a new gown for his mother. But what with the delay through the storm and Sybil's bad behaviour, he was sick of the whole business and only longing to get home again.

For a moment he stood looking at the welter of waters, and then glanced along the quay. A gentleman was coming towards him. Immediately Ronald recognised the tall, soldierly figure; it was Lieutenant Waldegrave.

The recognition was simultaneous. With an exclamation of surprise, Waldegrave hastened towards the young crofter.

But Ronald turned his head and walked away, swinging his stick and whistling a Gaelic tune to show his indifference.

'And what will he be doin' here?' he asked himself. 'Hass he not put enough shame on the Highlands already?'

Waldegrave followed him and grasped his arm. 'I say, Ronald man, what does this mean? You haven't forgotten me, have you? Why did you turn away as soon as you saw me?'

'And why will you be askin' me these questions, sir? Hef I not a good right to forget you, Lieutenant Waldegrave? And I will ask you this question, sir: why hef you forgotten us?'

'Forgotten you! Good heavens! do you think that I should be here if I had forgotten you? But there's something wrong, Ronald, awfully wrong, though I don't exactly know what. I've come back from Canada to find it all out. But look here, Ronald,' he added in a lower tone, 'those fellows are watch-

ing us and listening. Come with me. There are some things I want to know as quickly as you can tell me them.'

Ronald walked away with a perplexed air. He could not make it out at all, and only half understood the young soldier's impetuous words. But as he fixed his keen blue eyes on Waldegrave he saw that he was terribly in earnest, and meant every word he was saying.

'Ronald,' he asked as soon as they were alone. 'Is it true that Miss M'Iver is to be married to Mr. Nial Duff?'

'I hef neffer heard of such a thing, sir, No; I am sure she iss not. She will neffer be married to him, whateffer.'

'I knew it was a lie,' exclaimed Waldegrave. 'But, Ronald, tell me quickly, for you must know, how is it that no one has written to me from Fas-Ghlac? Not a letter has been received since we arrived in Canada.'

The young crofter looked up incredulously. 'Miss Fiona wrote four or five times, I know, for I took the letters to Sruthan myself. And Mr. M'Iver wrote; and I wrote for my mother to Miss Armstrong.'

'Well, Ronald, we have not received a line: though every one of us has written—I every week.'

'My Kott! will you be tellin' me that?' answered Ronald, 'and hef I not gone to the post-office effery week, and there hass neffer been a letter? And we all thought you had forgotten us.'

'Has every one believed that?' asked Waldegrave sternly, and turning very white about the mouth.

'Yes, effery one, sir, except Miss Fiona. She would not believe it.'

The colour came back into Waldegrave's face. 'Ah! she did not believe that I had forgotten you. How is she? and how is Mr. M'Iver?'

'Not fery well. There hass been a lot of trouble, maybe ye hef not heard; but come away, sir, and see the laird. This iss all fery strange, whateffer.'

'Mr. M'Iver! is he here? And Miss M'Iver is she here?'

'No, sir; she iss at Fas-Ghlac; but the laird iss here. He hass just come from Edinburgh. He iss waitin' to cross over to Mull. The storm has kept up since yesterday. But come along sir.'

In a few minutes Geoffrey was shaking hands with Torquil M'Iver, whom Ronald, knowing the old laird's belief regarding the young Englishman, had hastened to inform of the true state of affairs. For an hour or two they remained shut up together, and all that had transpired during Waldegrave's absence was gone over.

Mr. M'Iver prepared to go straight back to Edinburgh armed with information and papers that threw a strange light on his affairs, and revealed the villiany of Fergus Duff. It is almost needless to say that these had been supplied to Waldegrave by Martin Brown, who had sought him out in Canada, and disclosed matters of the utmost importance both to Torquil M'Iver and himself. Geoffrey was able to show the old laird the letter Lachlan M'Cuaig had written to his master, soon after the wreck of the 'Montreal,'

which letter, it will be remembered, Nial had thrust into an inner pocket of the coat his father had given to Martin Brown. It was this letter that had given Waldegrave a clue to what was going on, suggested an explanation of the silence, and caused him to hurry back without a moment's delay. And when he heard of the scene in Nial's den, of which Ronald made no secret, now that he understood something of the ills that had fallen on the M'Ivers through the Laird of Sruthan, he would brook no more delay in crossing to Mull. He had a vague dread that something would happen to Fiona during her father's absence.

So with a few good swears from Ronald—there is nothing like the Gaelic for forcible expression—and the offer of splendid pay from Waldegrave, a picked crew was got together, and they were landed during the afternoon at Grass point. Soon after they were spurring their way by the side of inland lochs and through wild mountain passes to Fas Ghlac.

On riding up to the M'Lean Arms at Sruthan, to procure fresh horses if possible, they saw that some unusual excitement was stirring the clachan. There was a little group about the post-office, and another round the door of the inn. And the commotion was by no means diminished at the sight of Waldegrave and Ronald galloping up at full speed. Waldegrave entered the parlour while the horses were being saddled, but he had hardly seated himself when Ronald flung open the door and exclaimed excitedly:

'The folk are sayin' that Sybil Grant and Lachlan M'Cuaig hef run off together. They were seen on their way to Tobermory this morning. And Mr. Nial Duff hass not been heard of since he went away in his boat on Tuesday.'

Waldegrave sprang to his feet.

'Are the horses ready?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Come along.'

'But, sir, I thought you wass goin' to the post office about the letters.'

'No time, Ronald.'

In another second they were on their way to the Pass of the Red Deer, and the groups closed together to discuss the fresh news. But they had scarcely given an opinion, when Colin Grant appeared and begged some one to go for Dr. Mackenzie. Mrs. Grant was down in a bad fit—she was so upset, Colin explained, about Sybil's departure. The real cause of her illness, however, was the appearance of Lieutenant Waldegrave. For she had found, that morning, his last letter in Sybil's bedroom. It had been opened, and Mrs. Grant understood then what had been going on, and why Sybil had run away.

Waldegrave and Ronald pushed forward with anxiety writ large upon their faces. A foreboding of evil had settled on them, and the horses were urged through the pass at their utmost speed.

The sun was down before they reached their destination, and when Waldegrave sprang from his horse and hurried to the house, it was already dark. A terrible dread seized him when he saw that the rooms were unlighted. It was no time for ceremony. He flung open the door and entered. At